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PARTNERSHIP AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRUST IN BRITISH WORKPLACES.

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Abstract.

This article examines the alleged links between ‘partnership’ forms of managing workplace relationships in Britain, and the development of intra-organisational ‘trust’. The potential for mutually complementary linkages between the two are clear, in theory at least: partnership, as defined here, should produce, nurture and enhance levels of interpersonal trust inside organisations, while in turn trust, as defined here, legitimates and helps reinforce an organisation’s ‘partnership’. Qualitative evidence drawn from the self-reports of key participants in three unionised partnership organisations provides some support for the claimed linkages. But it also highlights weaknesses, discrepancies and pitfalls inherent in the process of pursuing trust through partnership. These offer insights into the process for managers, trade union officials, employee representatives and policy-makers, as well as suggesting avenues for future research using trust as a theoretical framework.

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PARTNERSHIP AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRUST IN BRITISH WORKPLACES.

“The defining characteristic of successful partnerships is trust” (Cave & Coats [TUC], 1999: 23).

Introduction.

Since the early 1990s (GMB/UCW, 1990; IPA, 1992), the UK has undergone another of its periodic bouts of enthusiasm (see Ramsay, 1977) for reforms aimed at fostering collaborative, mutually beneficial workplace relations. ‘Partnership’ is official policy, albeit in rather differing forms, for the New Labour government (DTI, 1999) and the Trades Union Congress (TUC, 1999), while most of the largest trade unions have publicly endorsed the idea, including UNISON, the T&GWU, GMB, AEEU/MSF, and USDAW and almost all have engaged in partnership initiatives inside organisations. It is also the policy recommendation of choice for relevant think tanks (the Royal Society of Arts, 1994; Fabian Society, 1996; Industrial Society, 2001), as well as ACAS (1999). Even the CBI and the CIPD have cautiously welcomed it, with qualifications. Despite this widespread approval of the idea, very few genuine examples have been identified.¹

In almost all case studies of partnership, trust is a constant and “defining” presence (cf. the Cave & Coats quote above). Trust has been cited as a necessary pre-condition of partnership; as the process through which partnership is realised; as one of its most important outcomes, and as the main method for monitoring progress and constraining ‘anti-partnership’ actions. However, despite Guest and Peccei indicating a fruitful research agenda in examining “the role of trust in effective partnership at work... to identify the processes that must be in place for high trust to emerge” (2001: 232; see too Sparrow and Marchington, 1998: 311), trust has not hitherto formed the core of any research or academic analysis of partnership.

The article is divided into five sections. The following section presents a nuanced definition of the “central, superficially obvious but essentially complex” idea of trust (Blois, 1999). The second section proposes a complementary definition of partnership, based on the requirements for developing trust. The third section sets out the potential linkages between the two. Three case studies follow, presented according to Heaton, Mason and Morgan’s triadic structure: partnership development, implementation, and the involvement of the key players (2002: 113). The findings and conclusions offer an exploratory examination of the two concepts as they relate to each other, and in particular what partnership can and cannot do to improve workplace relations through developing trust.

Trust.

Trust is understood usually as a belief comprising the deliberate intention to render oneself vulnerable to another based on confident positive expectations (see Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995; Rousseau et al, 1998; Lewicki, McAllister & Bies, 1998). This definition requires a number of clarifying statements.

First, all parties in a trusting relationship are subject to a level of risk, although the distribution of risk may be disproportionate among the parties. This risk is derived directly from accepting the

¹ Robert Taylor (2003) has suggested that there are only 80 known cases that conform to the TUC’s definition of partnership. The DTI’s dedicated website (<http://www.partnership-at-work.com>) has 95 separate case studies, though not all comply strictly with the definition presented here. The government’s Partnership Fund, set up to offer financial support to partnership initiatives, has subsidised around 160 schemes so far (October 2003).

possibility of harmful consequences arising from the actions of the other parties, including their non-compliance with, defection against, or withdrawal from any agreements reached in the relationship. The mutual dependence and shared vulnerability inherent in trust distinguish it from other forms of securing co-operation, such as coercion. Second, because the decision to trust is based on expectations, or “probabilities” (Gambetta, 1988), trust carries a crucial “strength of feeling” (Bhattacharya et al, 1998: 462) that elevates it above mere hopefulness, blind faith or gullibility (see McEvily et al, 2003: 99). This important quality protects trust from three criticisms: that it is “unreflective” (Garfinkel’s claim, cited in Lane, 1998: 11), irrational (Williamson, 1993) or a form of ‘false consciousness’. Properly understood, it is none of these. Trust is a desired state, “an attractive option” (Gambetta, 1988: 219; Blois, 1999: 204). Third, for these expectations to be credible they should be based on a careful evaluation of the other party’s likely future behaviour, ideally from evidence drawn from several prior interactions and in a range of settings (Whitener et al, 1998: 515), although reputational effects and the advice of respected intermediaries can be other sources (see Meyerson et al, 1996). Fourth, this evaluation needs to assess the other party’s benevolence, integrity, competence and predictability (Cunningham & McGregor, 2000: 1578-9) but it can be “compartmentalised and aggregated” (Lewicki, McAllister and Bies, 1998) such that parties, if they wish, may accommodate contradictions and errors, if they still judge the quality of the other party’s trustworthiness overall to be sufficient.

It follows that trust is not a simple ‘either/or’ matter, and nor do categories such as “conditional” and “unconditional” (Jones & George, 1998) or “strong” and “weak” (Barney & Hansen, 1994) capture its subtleties of degree. In the literature there are five such degrees, derived from different sources and reflecting different levels of intensity. These can be placed along a continuum (Figure 1):

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE.

Deterrence-based trust (Rousseau et al, 1998) does not comply with the definition above; rather, it is a manifestation of distrust. There is no positive expectation of goodwill whatsoever, and compliance is guaranteed, rather than hoped for, through the threat of sanctions and force. The weakest form of trust is calculus-based (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996: 119) which, as the name suggests, considers trust a worthwhile strategy only on the basis of a strict cost-benefit analysis. A deep *a priori* suspicion of the other remains, but trusting them is a marginally better tactic than not trusting them. Between this and knowledge-based trust (Lewicki & Bunker, *ibid*: 121) a threshold is crossed when suspicions recede to be replaced by positive expectations based on confident knowledge about the other party. Real trust begins here. If expectations are vindicated by experience, more powerful forms of trust may develop. The confidence in relational-based trust (Rousseau et al, 1998: 399) is more subjective, even emotional in nature. Blois distinguishes between trust derived from the other party’s “dependable goodwill” and trust based only on their reliable habits (1999: 200). Similarly, Creed and Miles (1996) see the source of trust shift from ‘process-based’ evidence provided by the content of exchanges between the parties, to an appraisal of the trustee’s ‘characteristics’: their personal qualities and motives. As such, relational-based trust can tolerate minor ‘defections’ and mistakes as uncharacteristic aberrations. Lastly, the overwhelming affection and complete unity of purpose described in identification-based trust (Lewicki & Bunker, *ibid*: 122) is such that each party can represent the other’s interests with their full confidence. Use was made of these five degrees of trust in the case study interviews (see methodology).

Whitener and colleagues describe five categories of behaviour for individuals seeking to demonstrate trustworthiness (1998: 516-518):

1. Behavioural consistency - reliability and hence predictability.
2. Behavioural integrity - telling the truth and keeping promises.
3. Sharing and delegation of control - shared input into decision-making. (This falls somewhat short of what a European audience might understand by 'shared control'.)
4. Communication - open sharing of accurate, timely, contextualised information
5. Demonstration of concern - showing sensitivity toward each party's needs and interests, and acting benevolently.

Any model for workplace relations purporting to promote and develop trust would be expected to feature policies designed to encourage and reward these behaviours.

A definition of partnership.

As with trust, there is conceptual confusion on what is meant by workplace partnership (for a review see Ackers & Payne, 1998). There is still no agreed definition (Guest & Peccei, 2001: 208; Haynes & Allen, 2001: 166; Terry, 2003: 463), and little guidance on how we might recognise a genuine example.

Central to almost all conceptualisations is some notion of "reciprocity" (Martinez-Lucio & Stuart, 2002: 308) or "connotations of co-operation for mutual gain" (Tailby & Winchester, 2000: 374). These are rather vague – perhaps necessarily so, given the "inherent ambiguity" of the idea of partnership (Bacon & Storey, 2000: 409) – and one person's co-operation can be another's co-optation (Kelly, 1996; Claydon, 1998). A useful definition should therefore describe a set of organisational characteristics and practices that, firstly, do justice to the idea of managing employment relations in a 'partnership' manner and, secondly, are readily observable in order to verify a genuine example in practice. Two definitions, from the Involvement and Participation Association (IPA, 1992, 1997) and the TUC (1999: 13), offer this (Figure 2).

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE.

Both definitions are very similar in content, although some elements are interpreted differently (discussed below). The key point of departure between the two is that, under the IPA's definition, the partnership exists primarily between an employer's management team and its workforce, with the latter represented by a trade union if present. As such, it allows for non-unionised forms of partnership. Despite unions' understandable protestations, such forms can and do exist, although they are very rare indeed.²

The IPA's three 'commitments' and the TUC's six 'principles' are envisaged as firmly-held convictions about the nature of the employment relationship and how it is best managed. They provide coherence to the organisation's HR strategy and should inform the design, implementation and monitoring of partnership practice at all times and in all areas. They should also be widely publicised. (The commitment to develop trust is not an explicit feature of the TUC model, but is implicit under 'Recognising legitimate interests'.)

The central process of partnership is continuous joint problem solving throughout the organisation, alongside open and timely exchange of honest and accurate information "laterally, upwards and downwards" (IPA, 1997: 11). The precise structure and content of this is not

² Non-unionised partnerships include the John Lewis Partnership, Pentagram, Scott Bader Commonwealth, Sportasia, St Lukes' Communications and Tullis Russell, all of which are employee-owned. I know of only six examples of non-employee-owned, non-unionised partnership firms: Appor, Black & Decker, Dutton Engineering, Oldrid Group, Trifast, and Zotefoams – although more must presumably exist. (Details on each of these are available at <http://www.partnership-at-work.com>.)

prescribed, but in both models it is expected to involve a mix of direct and indirect forms – as appropriate to the organisation. (The TUC model is, understandably, rather less keen on direct forms, and views them only as an agenda-setting prelude to formal union/employer discussions.) The vital quality is that employee groups be able to influence significantly the decision-making from what has been called the ‘glint-in-the-eye’ stage of planning (TUC, 1999), up to and including its outcomes. Employees and their representatives are not understood to be mere “advisers to management” (Heery, 2002) or managers’ fellow change agents (Terry, 2003: 466). Indeed, one proxy measure for a mutually beneficial partnership might hinge on employees’ “ability to oppose management proposals” (Oxenbridge & Brown, 2002: 275). In Marchington and Wilkinson’s ‘escalator’ of five types of employee involvement (2000: 343), partnership’s joint problem solving most resembles at minimum ‘consultation’, and in more advanced forms, ‘co-determination’. Certainly, it demands more than weak ‘communication’ and ‘information’ mechanisms, but employee ‘control’ over decision-making is highly unlikely. With these exacting standards partnership is more likely to be observed in unionised representative forms (Guest & Peccei, 2001). But Knell (1999) found negligible differences between his non-unionised and unionised case studies, and IRS researchers have even suggested that non-union forms are often “more developed and deeper-rooted” (2000: 39).

Two main policy outcomes are produced. The first is common to both models: a “balance between employment security and flexibility”. What constitutes flexibility is left to the partners to define; it will of course vary from organisation to organisation. Employment security is not a ‘job-for-life’ promise, but “a stable employment framework” (IPA, 1997: 2) provided through a multi-year pay deal and/or a no-compulsory redundancy guarantee, complemented with careful joint management of unavoidable job losses. With this distinction in mind, one need not express surprise, as Hall did (cited in Munro & Rainbird, 2000: 226) when large-scale redundancies take place under partnership. The issue is *how* they are agreed upon and handled. Training to enhance staff ‘employability’ also plays a part.

The second policy outcome in the IPA model is ‘sharing organisational success’. This incorporates not just good basic pay and participation in reward schemes, such as employee share ownership, profit-sharing or gain-sharing bonuses, but organisation-wide celebrations of improved performance, staff perks and days out, and harmonised terms and conditions. Curiously, under the TUC model the explicit benefits to employees from engaging in partnership are somewhat narrowly confined to a “focus on the quality of working life” and “personal development” (TUC, 1999: 13). The matter of financial reward is not addressed.

These prescriptions are malleable enough to allow for several viable interpretations, but sufficiently specific about minimum quality standards for any policies and practices to ensure that they are both credible and observable. A genuine partnership organisation should have policies and practices addressing each element. To have only the principles without the practices is to have merely produced a mission statement; to have only the practices but no overarching principles is to leave the practices floundering for want of direction, and vulnerable to abandonment. To have no multi-level joint problem solving fails to differentiate partnership from passive compliance to managerial diktat, a “sham” empowerment initiative, or paternalism, while to have only joint problem solving but no exchange of mutual benefits or, more importantly, a commitment to improving relationships, fails to distinguish partnership from collective negotiations in general. Lastly, to be considered a partnership *organisation*, the programme should be accorded some degree of embedded permanence, rather than be a temporary, calculative tactic of co-operation over one or a handful of workplace matters (cf. Munro & Rainbird, 2000; ACAS case studies, 1999).

The above notwithstanding, what is clear in advocates' conceptualisations and from participants' accounts is that the terms of any agreement or an organisation's policies are secondary to the internal behavioural transformations and attitudinal improvements that the programme demands in what Geary and Roche call the "organisational micro-politics" (2003: 33). In Boxall and Purcell's truism, "structure does not equate with process" (2003: 171). Trust is considered central to this process (Coupar & Stevens, 1998: 145; Haynes & Allen, 2001: 181; Arrowsmith, 2002).

Partnership and the development of trust - theory.

Partnership would seem – in theory, at least – to fulfil the five pre-requisites for trustworthy behaviour (Whitener et al, 1998). The joint commitment to, and shared pursuit of, success encourages 'behavioural consistency' in line with this objective - even if what constitutes "success" and "joint commitment" might be subject to a useful clarifying discussion among the partners. Recognising the legitimate role and interests of each partner offers some protection against vulnerability by constraining parties' opportunism and promoting 'behavioural integrity', as well as 'demonstrating concern'. The IPA's 'commitment' to building trust speaks for itself. While adherence to publicly declared commitments and promises should become a matter of 'integrity' and 'demonstration of concern', and Gambetta endorses the "fundamental importance of long-term arrangements" (1988: 230), suspicion remains that such commitments can be rather cosmetic. The means through which each is translated into policy and practice is more important.

Partnership-style joint problem solving and open information sharing satisfies the requirements for 'communication' and 'sharing and delegation of control', with the aforementioned caveat attached on what Whitener and colleagues mean by 'control'. Allowing for greater shared input into decisions reflects managers' trust in employees and a willingness to be trusted in return. The process provides the means for exploring a common agenda around which trust can be built, while the joint approach helps diminish the sense of vulnerability and fear of opportunism that postpones parties' 'leap of faith' into trust. In particular, it helps employees render the factors affecting their working lives subject to some influence. Regular interactions over a mutually agreed agenda not only facilitate the crucial appraisal of the others' trustworthiness, but appreciation of different agendas and ideas can promote shared understanding, even empathy. Regular interaction also allows for monitoring each party's adherence to the partnership. Conducted in accordance with partnership-style principles, which demand 'integrity' and 'consistency' and resemble Walton and McKersie's integrative bargaining (1965: 131-148), this process must inevitably enhance trust - as, indeed, Kessler and Purcell found in their study of joint working parties (1996: 675).

Partnership's policy outcomes offer a mutually beneficial agenda around which parties can build trust. Balancing employment security with flexibility and productivity for mutual success emphasises a shared, prosperous, long-term future. Achieving the balance moreover demonstrates the viability of beneficial reciprocity and encourages the leap of faith into trust from all parties. Securing these two 'wins' for the future offsets the impact of any immediate 'losses', such as redundancies or increased workloads for employees, and partial surrender of prerogative for managers. Similarly, sharing success keeps the relationship positive through the exchange of mutual benefits, vindicating the trust. Both policy outcomes also help answer the 'what's in it for us?' cry from sceptics on both sides. The parallels with Whitener and colleagues' 'demonstration of concern' are obvious. More generally, these mutual gains exchanges correspond closely with Axelrod's optimal strategy for developing co-operation: reward beneficial behaviour, punish defections (1984).

The links are thus apparent in theory. In practice, we would expect to find in a fully-functioning partnership organisation consistently favourable viewpoints on the process from most, if not all, participants; an unambiguous shift toward the most positive degrees of trust, and significantly reduced reports of conflict and antagonism. We would also expect participants to cite the partnership programme, or elements thereof, as decisive influences on any shifts in trust. Conversely, in a partial or weakly supported partnership we would expect little change, reports of enduring conflicts, weaker degrees of trust and less cohesion in participants' accounts. The case studies explore these assumptions.

Case studies: methodology and limitations.

The research took the form of qualitative, interview-based case studies inside three unionised organisations recognised as having a full and functioning IPA-style partnership.³ Between 20 and 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted in each organisation, the final number being subject to the availability of suitable interviewees. Additional material was sourced from company documents, conference presentations, and media reports. Each organisation was visited twice to avoid a one-off 'snap-shot' of impressions and to benefit from participants having more time for reflection. (This is surely a methodological pre-requisite for a phenomenon as incremental as partnership.) Interviewees included the Managing Director or equivalent, HR managers and HR officers, all union convenors, several shop stewards and non-HR senior and line managers, plus a small sample of non-key players from the 'shop floor'.⁴ I was given access to known sceptics. The multiple interviewees are a strength of the method, both in terms of giving voice to different organisational constituencies at all levels and in corroborating accounts of what happened. However, there are some gaps, most notably among the 18 trade unions recognised by the 'NHS Trust' and among the senior managers in the manufacturing firms' parent companies.

Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis and lasted between 35 minutes to 2 hours, depending on how much the person had to say on partnership. All were tape-recorded. Open-ended questions solicited a narrative account of the partnership, seeking in particular to account for any attitudinal and behavioural shifts among the participants. Further questioning engaged the interviewee in a discussion on what (s)he understood partnership to mean in theory, and in practice inside their organisation. The interviews for the second visit tended to be with the key players. They were shown short definitions of the five degrees of trust (Appendix 2), and were asked to reflect on which best described relations in the organisation at key stages of the progress toward and beyond partnership. This proved highly illustrative, but was not without its methodological limitations. The complex terminology of the five degrees was not, in retrospect, an ideal instrument. (The wording was designed to retain the nuances of the different degrees.) However, all but two of the 18 second-round interviewees were able to make use of them and most offered careful and cogent responses. Many of the insights into trust also came from responses to other questions. It is also difficult in a semi-structured interview to isolate the impact of partnership on trust from other contributory factors, including the individual's innate pre-disposition to trust, for example. There are also the familiar problems surrounding subjectivity with the key players' testimonies, especially of interviewees projecting their experiences onto the organisation as a whole and post-hoc reflections being subject to error and bias, especially those which present the interviewee in a favourable light. Efforts to triangulate the data and to corroborate testimonies have reduced the impact of these problems. One further

³ I should declare an interest here. During this research I worked part-time in a self-employed capacity for the IPA as their Research Manager.

⁴ A list of interviewees is provided in Appendix 1.

preventative measure undertaken was to ask the key contact in each organisation (an HR manager) to approve for accuracy the narrative section presented here.

Space restrictions confine the case studies to only a brief narrative focussing on the salient points pertaining to partnership and trust, to the inevitable neglect of both detail and other important issues in the partnership debate. Gaps are unavoidable. As with any case study, the findings should be read as extrapolated inferences based on carefully corroborated testimonies, rather than ‘facts’ as such.

Case study 1: Allied Distillers (ADL).⁵

ADL is the flagship subsidiary of the British multi-national Allied Domecq. At the time of the study it employed 1,200 across 19 sites in Scotland, plus a gin distillery in south London. It recognises the GMB (production: 100% density), AEEU (engineers: 100%) and MSF (staff grades: 40%). Pre-partnership, ADL’s industrial relations was adversarial, with most interviewees reporting “no trust whatsoever”. Change was ‘bought’ by wage increases, passed onto loyal consumers through price increases. The catalyst for partnership came in the mid-1990s when Allied Domecq conducted a benchmarking exercise. It revealed ADL to be among the least efficient companies in the sector, but with the best-paid staff. A veiled threat to ADL’s future sparked moves toward reform. Various attempts to introduce a ‘partnership’, including the STAR initiative (described by Marks et al, 1998: 216), were hindered by an inconsistent approach from managers, deemed more “naïve” than scheming. Premature calls for joint problem solving were not well served by a reluctance to share information about business plans, and few significant exchanges of mutual benefit. In 1995, the company brought in a new cadre of younger managers, but their first approach to the still suspicious unions to engage in joint ‘brainstorming’ on ADL’s future also floundered. As one shop steward said, “You’re being too sophisticated for us. This is ‘HR’, and we’re used to ‘IR’” [i.e. industrial relations]. The Marks et al account covers the story only up to this point (1998: 217), hence their assessment of ADL’s partnership as weak and unconvincing.

ADL’s partnership agreement was eventually agreed at the fourth attempt. Following a presentation to the entire workforce by the MD explaining exactly the changes required, managers from HR and production were ‘locked’ into a hotel for three weeks of single-table negotiations with the three unions. The first week consisted of efforts to “break the ice”, to move beyond the traditional posturing of ADL’s combative industrial relations and find common ground. The blunt, ‘no-nonsense’ manner of the main company negotiator appealed to the unions more than the pseudo-collaborative ‘HR’ methods tried previously. The managers shared openly confidential business information and their strategic plans. The breakthrough came early with two significant ‘joint wins’: employment security in exchange for new flexible working practices, and a guarantee that there would be “no losers” financially. These demonstrated the viability of the partnership approach. Also, the intensity of the ‘sealed’ venue increased participants’ familiarity with each other, and spurred efforts to get the deal finalised. The unions felt that they had “quite a lot” of influence on the final decision-making [AEEU convenor].

The agreement, ‘Change Agenda’, was eventually approved in late 1996 after a costly and lengthy joint selling of its terms to a highly sceptical workforce. Alongside several statements of partnership principles, it exchanged a guarantee of no redundancies for the deal’s three-year lifespan (beyond the 221 voluntary job losses specified in the deal) in return for the workforce’s commitment to multi-skilling, the collapse of 32 pay grades into four and the abolition of all demarcations. As part of a skills-linked salary review, everyone’s pay went up and a series of

⁵ The interviews for this study took place in July 2000, four years after the signing of ADL’s partnership agreement. Follow-up interviews took place in July 2001.

bonuses were staggered over the three years. (ADL also runs an employee share ownership scheme.) The agreement inaugurated several consultation forums, including a dedicated partnership steering group and joint working parties to involve shop floor employees in improving ADL's productivity. The agreement was rewarded with £20m of capital investment in a new all-in-one facility that "never would have been authorised" otherwise [then HR Director]. The deal has since been re-negotiated and ratified twice more, extending the employment security guarantee each time.

The joint problem solving worked well until 2001, when key signatories on both sides left ADL, taking much of the impetus for partnership with them. Inter-union animosities also resurfaced, dismantling the partnership's single-table arrangements. Finally, an incursion by management into employees' cherished customs and practice on managing their own break times - ironically secured as part of the 'Change Agenda' deal - nearly undid the hard-won trust, almost taking the partnership down with it. In the second-round interviews, all interviewees described the partnership as still intact, but less secure than before.

Tracking the key players' assessments of the quality of trust during this five-year process, most selected deterrence-based trust to describe the "bleak" pre-partnership period. During the 'Change Agenda' talks, and the joint campaign to sell the deal, trust among the key players soared to relational-based and even identification-based levels. Union interviewees were less keen to emphasise this harmony of purpose. Each key player conceded however that trust was far greater among themselves than between the 'workforce' and the 'company'. Even five years on, the partnership ethos had yet to percolate throughout ADL. Reflecting on this, the then HR Director conceded: "In reality, what you've done with partnership is convince a finite group of people to work with you". But, he felt, "it's bound to be that way in a large business" because trust comes from extensive experience of an individual, which non-key players are not privy to. "Partnerships tend to get built on personalities", felt one union convenor. The HR manager felt that it "really shouldn't make a difference [if the original 'architects' leave] if the process is bedded down and you use the [partnership] systems". But, he argued, participants need to keep focussed on sustaining the application of partnership principles, lest either "entrenchment from a lack of understanding" or "short-termism: winning the battles but losing the war" start to contaminate relations. The then HR Director expanded:

"You cannot expect groups to take partnership beyond their own interests... There *is* a 'greater good' programme, but there's a limit to it, and points beyond which the unions cannot go... If the company oversteps 'reasonableness' then it de-legitimises the partnership and it breaks down."

He declined to speculate on where these parameters might fall, but condemned managers' transgressions as "madness". However, a manager enmeshed in the dispute over break times presented the dilemma in the form of a question: "Is making difficult decisions seen by employees as a break in trust?" The incident suggests that it is and therein lies the rub (discussed in the conclusion).⁶

⁶ The 'breaks issue' was resolved the following year as part of the 2002 annual negotiations with the trade unions. The talks themselves were very protracted and at one stage saw two one-day stoppages by the engineers' union. But they eventually culminated in two very close votes (from the AEEU and GMB separately) in favour of accepting the deal. It featured as key elements the introduction of '24/7 working', a reduction in contractual working hours to 36 hours (a first for the industry), the creation of nearly 200 new permanent jobs, control of working hours in anticipation of future European legislation (including a reduction in overtime), and a 'breaks' system which reflected ADL's aspirations toward World Class Manufacturing standards (telephone conversation with HR Director, October 2003).

The ADL case shows what partnership can achieve in a hostile environment in terms of improved industrial relations and productivity. But it also suggests strongly that maintaining partnership-minded relations relies upon the strength of character, commitment and abilities of the key players. Moreover, the resilience of these relationships can be tested sorely by the implications of competitive pressures.

Case study 2: BorgWarner Torq Transfers (BWTT).⁷

BWTT is a single-site auto components firm, the UK subsidiary of a U.S. corporation. In 2001 it employed 200 people, down from a peak of 1,700 thirty years previously. In the 1970s the militant engineering unions “ran the plant. We would oppose anything from managers – no questioning of the members, no reasoning, just opposition” [then shop steward]. The first move toward partnership came in 1983 when a catastrophic downturn in the industry threatened the plant’s future. Joint problem solving, reluctantly entered into by the unions but encouraged by greatly increased information sharing about the business, produced an “astonishing” six-year pay deal (Bassett, 1986: 98-99) in exchange for workforce commitment to “technical ability, flexibility and trust-based industrial relations” [then convenor]. Though it was not called a partnership, it resembled one in both content and process. The patchily introduced flexibility saved the plant and improved performance. But a joint venture failed in 1993 and the 220 unavoidable job losses amounted to over half the workforce. Worse, 18 had to be compulsory, requiring the sole union (AEEU) to abandon its ‘last-in-first-out’ principle. This time joint problem solving began well in advance. The union was shown BWTT’s ‘books’ and worked on the plans to stave off closure. This helped them convince the enraged workforce that management was not lying, and that the reforms could work. In the end, the workforce accepted the ‘Hobson’s choice’ of a deal by a margin of four-to-one. In response, the MD offered an above-inflation pay offer and no compulsory redundancies for two years. Both sides committed to formal joint problem solving to try to prevent further catastrophes, and to cement the improved industrial relations.

1997’s partnership agreement, ‘The Margam Way’, emerged from these talks. All the key players noted its switch in tone and emphasis away from prescriptive substantive terms toward what an ex-convenor called a more “conceptual” agreement revolving around notions of trust and teamwork. In fact, the text is dominated by substantive detail, so these comments would seem to elevate the process aspects above the more tangible outcomes. Alongside the three partnership commitments, including one to “progressive employee relations”, the deal confirmed a jointly designed, fair and generous redundancy management policy (employment security being an unattainable promise) alongside a commitment to flexible work practices. Union-management problem solving now extends to all matters pertaining to the plant, and the ‘open-book’ policy on information shares every detail on costs, sales, performance and profits with the workforce. The union can even send BWTT’s financial books to their own officials for scrutiny; they have never felt the need to do so. Team structures and continuous improvement practices engage employees in improving production. Pay continues to be subject to collective bargaining but whereas it was once a protracted and antagonistic affair, it “now takes half an hour and fits into our teamwork philosophy”. According to the convenor, his members’ salaries and terms and conditions are “second to none” for the area, with additional gainsharing bonuses for hitting agreed performance targets. The substantive terms of the agreement have been amended and

⁷ The interviews for this study took place in August 2000, four years after the signing of BWTT’s partnership agreement although, arguably, seventeen years after the first move toward partnership. Follow-up interviews took place in July 2001.

endorsed by the workforce each year since, despite regular small-scale rounds of redundancies, including 30 in 2001.

Appraising shifts in trust over the course of BWTT's partnership based on key players' testimonies, the 1993 crisis meant that formal partnership talks began from a position of deterrence-based, or at best, calculus-based trust. Trust improved cautiously during the design of 1997's partnership to knowledge-based trust, attributed to the greatly increased information sharing and a collective siege mentality. By 2001 relations had stabilised into a solid relational-based trust for almost all the key players, facilitated by the daily joint problem solving: "Trust comes from the way we are prepared to come to solutions, not to have dictates" [plant manager]. As at ADL, the union reps shied away from reporting extremely high trust, with one shop steward arguing that knowledge-based trust was "about the healthiest you can get... the ideal to aim for, because it doesn't harm you to be wary". Also as at ADL, BWTT's shop floor workers proved less trusting of managers than their representatives are, despite the impressive information sharing, which is appreciated but still not always believed - a consequence perhaps of the plant's often-uncertain future. What shop floor animosity there was toward partnership was aimed more at the union who "run with the hares and the hounds" [operative]. Many shop floor interviewees expressed annoyance at what they perceive to be 'like-it-or-lump-it' choices from the union. In response, the convenor dismissed critics as "dinosaurs" who will never trust management and offer no alternatives. He believes passionately that partnership constitutes the employees' best strategic response to Chicago HQ's investment decisions: "Partnership won't close this plant down; company politics will". No challenge to partnership has ever materialised, and nor is one likely.

That BWTT is still operating is, for them, testament to their partnership. The partnership has withstood grave assaults on its founding principles, including three potential final closures. The case study is an example of the adaptability and endurance of partnership. However, it highlights that even a strong local partnership can be undone in a moment by events or decisions beyond the jurisdiction of the partnership. The BWTT partnership, as at ADL, is also heavily reliant on the goodwill secured on a personal level among the key players. The stability in personnel in these key roles over 20 years has evidently been a vital factor.

Case study 3: 'NHS Trust'.⁸

'NHS Trust' employs 5,000 staff across four main sites, with a further 20 District Nurse locations. It recognises 18 trade unions, of which three predominate: UNISON, MSF and the GMB. Overall trade union density is 75%.

In 1997 the organisation was "happy to call itself 'unhappy'" [then Chairman]. Its industrial relations were antagonistic, with few attempts at joint problem solving. The catalyst for change came with the arrival of a new Chairman, who pressed for an acknowledgement on all sides that this did not fit with the New Labour government's exhortations on partnership. Over a period of six months a joint working party, operating parallel to the Whitley consultative committee, discussed different partnership models and received case study presentations. Experiments in joint problem solving produced significant 'wins' early on, including the shared research and authorship of around 20 HR policies: "We undertook an open, free-for-all discussion about the policy in front of us, and as we did we started losing our respective identities as either 'staff side'

⁸ The interviews for this study took place in July 2000, a year after the first formal declaration of intent, and three years after the first move toward partnership. The follow-up interviews took place in February and again in October 2001 due to absences. The third visit came shortly after the Trust approved its revised model of partnership. Note: The organisation requested anonymity for this article.

or ‘manager’” [manager]. These successes demonstrated to cynics on all sides the merits of the partnership approach.

Fifteen months into the process, the now official Partnership Forum produced a ‘statement of [partnership] intent’ confined primarily to well-intentioned aspirations based on the theme of mutuality in the IPA model. While it cemented further the joint effort among the key players, the wider workforce met it with indifference: “We’ve had that many mission statements!” [shop steward]. In March 2000 the Forum organised a ‘meet-the-workforce’ walkabout, pairing union reps with managers to go around asking staff for suggestions on ways to improve their own workplace, and to promote the burgeoning partnership. Another shop steward hailed this “the best thing we’ve ever done”.

Shortly afterwards, the two leading management architects left the Trust. Their replacements reiterated support for partnership, but signalled a change in style. Decision-making was gradually withdrawn from the Forum’s protracted joint design process and replaced with management-penned proposals tabled for discussion, reminiscent for many of the pre-partnership era. Explaining the new approach, the new HR Director highlighted what he perceived to be a conflict of priorities between administrative effectiveness and the unions’ need to consult their members adequately: “You have to continually pose the question, ‘what is the purpose of using partnership?’ Is it for employee involvement and ‘inclusivity’, or for better policy outcomes?” The HR department began to lead the discussions at the less frequent meetings, and the style of engagement switched between partnership-minded joint problem solving and more confrontational tactics, depending on the decision under discussion and the outcome sought. Some union reps responded in kind, but others continued to try to work with the new approach.

The Forum approved a revised model for partnership in May 2001, with few objections. It was intended to “bring the partnership as close as possible to people’s jobs with a representative body overlaid on top of that” [HR Director]. In an ongoing process of what the text described as “de-centralisation of authority” the model aspired to an organisation-wide system of “joint decision-making wherever possible”, with workplace-level arrangements feeding into sectional consultative forums up to a joint Partnership Group committee whose role would be to issue guidance and direction to the lower-level forums.

In July 2001 the few “pockets of excellence” at the workplace level had been established by enthusiastic, committed departmental managers prior to the new partnership programme. Most other departments had not submitted proposals for their workplace arrangements. The HR Director rated the Trust’s new era of partnership as “on the whole 4 or 5 out of 10”. The long-standing plan for an employee Board representative, first mooted in 1999, had still not materialised, largely because the ‘staff side’ were unable to decide who should take the post. (The Chair of the staff side representatives has since been appointed.) Of the other partnership elements, employment security was not then a major concern for the Trust’s staff, although the HR Director saw it as “an absolute pre-requisite for change management” and was developing a formal policy statement for the organisation’s future plans. Sharing success is difficult in monetary terms as the Trust does not have local pay bargaining, but it has sought to promote its partnership credentials and celebrate its performance achievements with staff. In sum, when the research period came to an end, the second-phase partnership programme was still in development, but key players’ testimonies made clear that the joint approach was less apparent than before and the process fragmented. Partnership did not appear to be considered *the* strategy for hitting the Trust’s performance targets, but an adjunct to it.

When asked to reflect on the shifting degrees of trust during the partnership process, the key players involved throughout affirmed that trust did improve, from deterrence-based to knowledge-based trust as parties “made in-roads... doing something together” [HR manager]. A shop steward agreed: “We had worked enough together that there was ‘much less reliance on the threat of sanction’”. Assessments on relations in 2001 however revealed contradictory impressions and less conviction. Indicative of this was that most key players pitched their responses around the threshold of positive trust (i.e. between calculus-based and knowledge-based). Perceptions were susceptible to individuals’ enthusiasm for partnership, and the quality of working friendships (deterrence-based with some; relational-based with others). Similarly, trust levels were felt to wax and wane, depending on the issue involved – indicative of a fragmented partnership programme and inconsistent negotiating tactics. While one shop steward bemoaned the “cosy monthly discussions... too much patting on the back, we’re not actually doing it [partnership]”, the HR Director’s view was less positive, with relations only “tending toward” knowledge-based trust.

The experience at ‘NHS Trust’ is illustrative of three key aspects of the idea of partnership: its adaptability (or vulnerability) to shifting definitions and structures, as well as personnel; the need to demonstrate consistently partnership-oriented behaviours but also the debate as to what these in fact are and how far they can be extended, and finally, arguably, the value of institutionalising partnership systems.

Findings: Partnership and the development of trust.

All three case study organisations satisfy the IPA criteria for a *genuine* partnership, albeit with some concerns about the quality of certain elements (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3: IS EACH CASE STUDY A GENUINE PARTNERSHIP?

The bulk of key players’ self-reports accounting for shifts in degrees of trust tallied consistently with the narrative of their organisation’s partnership. In the three unionised cases reflections overwhelmingly, though not unanimously, pointed to major improvements in trust following the partnership (from deterrence-based trust up to and including identification-based trust) between people who previously had been locked in bitter conflict. However, trust levels wavered when the partnership process seemed to falter, notably at ‘NHS Trust’ and ADL. It did not when the partnership process remained robust (BWTT).

The frequency of joint problem solving across an extended range of workplace issues, in tandem with open and honest information sharing, was most commonly cited as having the greatest effect on progress toward partnership and in developing trust. This finding is readily predictable from the trust literature (cf. Whitener et al’s ‘sharing and delegation of control’ and ‘communication’). It echoes D’Art and Turner who found that increased personal contact, the introduction of a common or super-ordinate goal and employee participation in collaborative initiatives with managers all shifted attitudes toward co-operation and increased trust (1999: 103-4; also Deery, Erwin & Iverson, 1999). Gall (2001: 368), Badigannavar (2002: 48-49) and Wills (2002) have also reported the value of information sharing to partnership. Also viewed very positively were early tangible demonstrations of mutual gain (‘demonstration of concern’), especially provisions for employment security. All three case studies featured such a policy, but Martinez-Lucio and Stuart found very few in their partnership research with the MSF (2002: 314). Surprisingly, none of the interviewees seemed to value sharing success as a positive and helpful outcome. Much of this re-emphasises long-standing findings that collaborative ‘mutual

gains' industrial relations, based on information sharing and joint participation in decision-making, leads to greater trust (see Fox, 1974; Batstone et al., 1977; Purcell, 1981).⁹

The central lesson of all three case studies is that the *manner* in which the partnership principles and policies are executed, and embodied in the attitudes and behaviours of the key players, is of far greater significance than structures and practices: "Good processes matter more than institutions" (Guest and Peccei, 1998: 9). 'NHS Trust' had designed a potentially exemplary model, but had yet to develop consistently the requisite attitudes and behaviours, while BWTT had perhaps the least impressive practices on paper, but its key players demonstrated high mutual trust. Both partnership and trust fared better where there was persistent effort to uphold its principled commitments ('integrity' and 'consistency'), echoing the findings from Guest and Peccei (1998), and where parties delivered on their promise of mutually beneficial outcomes ('demonstration of concern'). Where behaviour was either inconsistent or ran contrary to partnership's spirit, or mutual benefits were either not forthcoming or not immediately tangible, interviewees tended to report trust faltering around the threshold between calculus-based and knowledge-based trust. This seemed to have the debilitating effect on progress that the literature on trust would lead us to expect. It follows that the original partnership signatories, or like-minded persons, must maintain control of the process. Where there was disruption to the 'elite' personnel ('NHS Trust', ADL) partnership, and trust, suffered setbacks, whereas continuity contributed to trust levels being generally higher (BWTT). These findings are straightforward enough, even tautological, but they are not without their problematic implications (discussed below).

A major finding is that in all three cases the enhanced trust seemed to be confined in the main to an 'elite' of key players. Their powerful trust levels were not felt to be replicated to anything like the same extent in relationships between 'the organisation/ management' and the 'shop floor' in general. Marks et al (1998: 225), Heaton et al (2002: 123) and Geary and Roche (2003: 41) all report a comparable fissure in opinion on partnership and/or trust. Most shop floor employees were non-key players and so, by definition, uninvolved in the main partnership process. Few had developed much appreciation of partnership; it seemed peripheral to their working lives and they felt unable to comment. They expressed at best lukewarm support tinged with scepticism, or shrugged with ambivalence. None were hostile (although all three organisations have cynics, on both sides). The trust literature provides an explanation for this mismatch. Trust typically relies upon direct personal engagement with the other party in a collaborative process. If only the key players interact with each other in this way, and non-key players are unable to exert much influence on partnership's decision-making, then the latter are more likely to feel vulnerable and less confident in bestowing trust. Accordingly, one might speculate that trust levels on the shop floor will be higher where managers meet more frequently with them, and/or devolve joint problem-solving properly to them. Where this is not feasible, the key players should share information openly and explain the reasons for organisational decisions, lest they be seen as a

⁹ That said, quantitative research on partnership has proved somewhat agnostic on the link with trust. Martinez-Lucio and Stuart's (2002) sample of MSF union officials delivered a mean level of trust of only 3.57 on a 1-5 scale for their relations with managers. Some of these respondents might not be dealing with an IPA-standard of partnership however, and it would be interesting to learn the trust levels inside those firms that did conform to the IPA definition. Geary and Roche's study within Aer Rianta, an impressive example of partnership in Ireland, asked employees to respond on a 1-5 scale to the item, "Better understanding and trust exist between management and employees" as a result of partnership. They report a mean response of only 2.75, with 2 indicating 'disagreement' (2003: 49). Based on the propositions put forward here, one might expect the trust between the *key players* and management to be rather higher. Finally, Badigannavar reports higher trust levels inside his non-unionised partnership retail firm, when compared with other retail firms surveyed in the British Workplace Representation and Participation Survey (2002: 49).

remote elite, a self-serving “cosy club”. (That said, the BWTT experience suggests that not even this can be assumed.)

Can partnership deliver?

There are few sensible objections to the spread of trust at work, beyond the pitfalls of complacency, complicity and unreasonable constraint, or Bachman’s warning of a “façade of trust” (1998: 311). The IPA’s partnership definition offers much to allay these fears. Instead, trust is widely commended for its impact on performance through efficiency gains from lower transaction costs, its ability to deliver active consent to change, and for its facilitation of more positive employment relations (see Arrow, 1974; Barney & Hansen, 1994; Whitener, 1997). Interviewees’ testimonies from all three case study organisations indicate that partnership can deliver these outcomes. Additionally, each organisation could point to better terms and conditions for its employees, although claims to a better quality of working life would be contentious in some settings where the research found evidence of increased workloads negotiated as part of the partnership. Overall, the cases provide evidence of partnership’s potential and attractiveness to different constituencies in three different settings.

The partnership process is however fraught with risk, centring around its reliance on behavioural consistency and integrity, and regular delivery of mutual benefits. These two attributes may be partnership’s greatest selling point, but may also prove something of an Achilles heel. Can partnership’s code of honour and its balanced exchange of acceptable mutual gains be sustained? Eventually most relationships, partnership or otherwise, reach one party’s ‘line in the sand’. Gall quotes a UNIFI union rep posing “the unanswered question... what will happen when they [the employers] want something very badly and we want very badly to stop it?” (2001: 369). Resisting opportunism might not always be in the parties’ best interests and joint problem solving may not always be able to accommodate every factional interest. What then? The paradox is that the fall-out from error, or abuse of strong trust, may prove much worse than if parties had not attempted to improve trust at all. A BWTT shop steward borrowed a football managers’ cliché to explain partnership as viewed through the prism of trust: perhaps it is “only as good as the last result”?

Few clues on how partnership can cope with this dilemma are discernible in the content of agreements or policies; each organisation has very different arrangements after all. Again, the case studies suggest instead that the strength or otherwise of partnership, and of trust, resides in the *informal* relationships forged among the key players, and their capacity to translate the terms of an agreement into tangible results and perhaps even into cultural norms. This reliance on “personalities”, continuity of personnel and consistent mutually supportive behaviour does render partnership and trust inherently fragile, but the case studies provide encouraging evidence of partnership’s resilience and longevity – although none are assured permanence of course.

Should partnership therefore be formalised (Reilly, 2002)? Oxenbridge and Brown (2002: 269) found that informal partnerships (i.e. those governed primarily by close relationships and behavioural codes) were more successful than partnerships with more formal procedural regulations, but Heaton and colleagues found the reverse (2002: 117). In the case studies presented here a formal agreement seemed to act as a catalyst for further progress, but each partnership seems to have drawn its strength from *both* its formal and informal codes of behaviour. Here, the trust literature is instructive. Creed and Miles (1996) claim, persuasively, an inverse link between the extent of control and the extent of trust: where there is too much control there is, by definition, too little trust. But the reverse is also true. Control, and even coercion, comes into play when adequate trust is not present. This may be the case at the start of a partnership process (Boxall & Purcell, 2003: 178), but should diminish as trust develops. Too

much trust however can reduce monitoring and invite the prospect of ‘defection’ or betrayal. It would seem prudent therefore to recommend that a modest, achievable and valuable outcome from partnership would be the establishment and sustainability of positive and efficient knowledge-based trust, and in more sophisticated and long-standing forms, relational-based trust. Parties would do well to reflect upon Gambetta’s conclusion: “Asking too little of trust is just as ill-advised as asking too much” (1988: 235).

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Figure 1: *The five degrees of trust.*

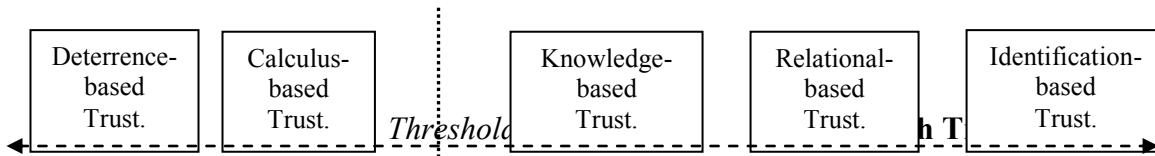


Figure 2: *The content of partnership.*

Partnership element	IPA	TUC
A joint declaration of commitment to organisational success	Y	Y
Mutual recognition of the legitimate role and interests of management, employees and trade unions where present	Y	Y
Commitment and effort to develop and sustain trust between the organisation's constituencies	Y	-*
Means for sharing information [IPA]/ Transparency [TUC]	Y	Y
Consultation and employee involvement, with representative arrangements for an 'independent employee voice' [IPA]/ Transparency [TUC]	Y	Y
Policies to balance flexibility with employment security [IPA/ TUC]	Y	Y
Sharing organisational success [IPA]	Y	-
Adding value [TUC]	-*	Y
Improving the quality of working life [TUC]	- *	Y

* Implied in the text, but not an explicit part of the model.

Figure 3: *Is each case study a genuine partnership?*

Partnership element	ADL	BWTT	'NHS Trust'
Joint commitment to organisational success	Y	Y	Y
Mutual recognition of the legitimate role and interests of all parties	Y	Y	Y/?
Commitment and effort to develop and sustain trust	Y	Y	Y
Means for sharing information	Y	Y	Y/?
Consultation, joint problem solving and employee involvement	Y/?	Y	Y/?
Policies to balance flexibility with employment security	Y	Y/?	Y
Sharing organisational success	Y	Y	Y

Appendix 1 – List of interviewees.

	Senior management	Senior trade union officials	‘Shop floor’ employees (incl. employee representatives)	Others
ADL	1 Managing Director 1 HR Director 5 Production managers 2 HR Managers	4 union convenors (incl. 2 from AEEU)	3 operators (2 shop stewards) 1 engineer (ex-shop steward) 1 production team leader	1 HR Officer Editor, company newspaper
BWTT	2 Plant managers	1 (present) plant convenor 1 deputy convenor 2 ex-convenors	6 operatives (2 shop stewards) 3 engineers (1 shop steward) 2 admin officers (1 shop steward)	2 HR Officers 1 Group leader, production 1 Group leader, administration 1 ex-purchasing manager
‘NHS Trust’	1 Chairman 2 HR Directors 1 HR Manager 1 Finance Director 1 Senior general manager 1 Directorate manager	1 ‘staff-side’ Chairman	2 nurses (1 shop steward) 1 admin officer (also a shop steward) 1 technician (also a shop steward) 1 cleaner (supervisor)	[Not applicable]

Appendix 2: *The definitions of trust presented to second round interviewees.*

<p>Deterrence-based Trust:</p> <p>Not trust at all in any positive sense, but a manifestation of distrust, with co-operation reinforced or imposed through the threat of deterrents.</p>	<p>Calculus-based Trust:</p> <p>Does involve vulnerability and a pre-disposition toward trust, while retaining its reliance on a valid cost-benefit analysis, and the protections provided by deterrence rather than by mutual goodwill.</p>	<p>Knowledge-based Trust:</p> <p>Based much more on judging the other's predictability, against evidence drawn from a series of interactions; a "<i>positive expectation</i>" arises. Much less reliance on the threat of sanction to reinforce the collaboration.</p>	<p>Relational-based Trust:</p> <p>Based on consistent evidence of reliability, for mutual benefit, hence there is some convergence of interests. Enduring principles can emerge that set clear parameters around what is acceptable in the relationship. It can even lead to an emotional bond developing between parties.</p>	<p>Identification-based Trust:</p> <p>Based on mutual understanding and affection, this degree of trust is for Lewicki and Bunker most readily associated with love affairs. The intensity of the trust belief means that betrayal is felt all the deeper.</p>
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